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Dean Logan's Blog

"Bloody Sunday" Remembered: Crossing the Bridge with Rep. John Lewis, VP Joe Biden, and AG Eric Holder

Posted by David Logan on 03/25/2013 at 12:26 PM

Day 3 dawned bright and clear for the last leg of our Civil Rights pilgrimage to Alabama, ground zero for the struggle to win the right to vote for all Americans. Our goal: follow Rep. John Lewis across the same bridge where 48 years earlier Alabama police brutally attacked him and 600 peaceful marchers trying to bring national attention to the lack of voting rights for Black southerners.

On the bus, the anticipation of the annual "Bloody Sunday" march across the Edmund Pettus Bridge was palpable. Along the road from Montgomery, Betty Mae Sykes pointed out the desolate stretch of highway where Klan members murdered white activist Viola Liuzzo http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Viola_Liuzzo



Rep. Cicilline and Senator Amy Klobuchar (D-Minn.)

Our first stop was the Edmund Pettus Bridge, where we posed for pictures, both formal and informal.



With Sister Antona Ebo, who as an African-American nun drew national attention to the struggle in Alabama for voting rights.

<http://www.americancatholic.org/Messenger/Mar2007/Feature1.asp>



With my Congressman, and pilgrimage host, Rep. David Cicilline



With Bob Zellner, a stalwart member of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee



The Faith and Politics Pilgrims

We then headed to Brown Chapel A.M.E Church, the headquarters of the voting rights campaign in 1965, where we heard a fiery sermon and had another tasty church lunch. It was after lunch that one of the trip's unique moments occurred; I was chatting with Luci Baines Johnson about the impending march and she offered that she was "wearing the dress her Mother wore on the day" that LBJ signed the landmark Voting Rights Act of 1965.

Next stop was downtown Selma for the speeches by dignitaries, including Vice President Joe Biden (who spoke for many on the pilgrimage; "[I] apologize it took me 48 years to get here. I should have been here; it is one of the regrets that I have and that many in my generation have." <http://www.cbsnews.com/video/watch/?id=50142089n>)

Speakers like Reverend Jesse Jackson and Al Sharpton noted the link between this bridge and a case currently pending in the Supreme Court of the United States that could eviscerate a key piece of the Voting Rights Act. <http://www.naacpldf.org/case/shelby-county-alabama-v-holder>



Rep. John Lewis contemplating yet another march over the Pettus Bridge

And then John Lewis said, “it is time to go across that bridge one more time;” he led us up the bridge, as we sang movement anthems “We Shall Overcome” and “Ain’t Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Around.” (Click here for an amazing version of the song by The Roots, with period photos <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ta6UmkqzZA0>). Our group now numbered 300, followed by a crowd 5,000 others, headed up the ramp; as we reached the crest of the bridge, Rep. Lewis stopped and remembered for us the exact events of that fateful day: *He and Rev. Williams at the front, hundreds of the Alabama State Police below; the Major in charge, barking into a megaphone, giving the demonstrators two minutes to “return to your church or to your homes.” When Rep. Lewis and Rev. Hosea Williams instead kneeled to pray, the troops were directed to “advance.” A volley of tear gas, and then mounted and foot police proceeded to beat the peaceful marchers with nightsticks and bull whips; 17 marchers were hospitalized.*

Then, we crossed the bridge and completed the last event on our pilgrimage. (Representative Lewis' comments begin two minutes into the video).



(How things have changed! we not only were allowed to cross the bridge, but we were actually escorted to the other side by Alabama State Police, where we boarded our buses for the trip to the airport and the flight home.)

For those interested in learning more about “Bloody Sunday,” the intervention of U.S. troops to protect the marchers when they eventually returned to the bridge for the march to Montgomery, and how national shock at the images of beaten marchers propelled passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, click here. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Selma_to_Montgomery_marches

My memories from the trip were priceless, as I look back on three days of laughing, crying, singing, and yes, marching. My deepest thanks to my host Rep. Cicilline and to the remarkable group that organized the trip, the Faith in Politics Institute.

<http://faithandpolitics.org/>